

“ANOTHER KIND OF PRIMITIVE DREAM”. INTERVIEW WITH APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

by Susana Nascimento Duarte (IFILNOVA)

and José Bértolo (CEC - University of Lisbon)

One could say that your films (and installations) constitute a kind of psychogeographic cinema, in the sense that memory is what triggers images and the circulation between them. But we sense that more and more you tend to use cinema and your work to proceed to an archaeology of collective memory in your country, even if this broader memory is inseparable from your own life and individual memories. How did you become interested in this dimension of the repressed History of Thailand? Can you track this back to a particular moment in your work, or was it something virtually there from the beginning?

It is what filmmaking offered me. Before I didn't think of filmmaking as something internal. It was the flow of this career, the fact that it made me meet so many people, my actors and other crew members, that brought me to this connection between film and the expression of memories. In fact, you need a lot of people to help you bring this out, and along the way the idea of sharing has become more important in the actual work. And then, I started to question my own identity, because of the encounter with other identities, especially my actress, Jenjira, who opened up her history of growing up in the same region, the northeast of Thailand. That's why I started thinking on what I know about my country. In order to get different perspectives, I travel with her and other crew member — the art director, for instance — along the Mekong area, to interview people, with no motive other than to just listen and document. Automatically, this awareness of repression came up. And it is part of life, it came up really naturally, because I just present my life and this has become my life. It is automatically there.

In a late scene of Cemetery of Splendor, we see superimposed on the blue sky an amoeba, which is known for its striking ability to change its shape. The search for an elusive form seems very present in your work ever since Mysterious Object at Noon, in which it is the exquisite corpse that helps shaping the narrative and the film. In a way, every film is a prisoner of its final form, but all of your works seem to search for ways of breaking up their form, of overflowing. I find this

particularly striking in films such as Mysterious Object, Haunted Houses or Mekong Hotel, which you described somewhere as a “rehearsal for an imaginary film”, but I guess we could extend this to all of your films. To what extent is the final form of your films self-sufficient? Would you say that the best way to experience them is to hallucinate other imaginary films over them?

I never experience my own films. The magicians never experience their own magic, because they know the trick behind it. So, behind my films, for me, there is the whole history of each shot, what happened there, the material we left out... In the end, I came to appreciate the whole thing as a stream of performance. I feel that the fluidity is to be found during this performance. And the cut off time is just to release remnants, the products. It is basically dictated by economy and the producers, the festivals' deadlines or whatever. Otherwise, I would keep doing it, sculpting, reshooting.

You also seem very interested in capturing on film elements of dematerialization which are usually found in the natural world — for example, the amoeba, the skies, the river in Blissfully Yours or Mekong Hotel, the ashes in Luminous People, extreme light and obscurity in Tropical Malady or Uncle Boonmee, the mist in Vapour, etc. The way you use these elements suggests that you conceptualize reality as something eminently fluid and metamorphic. This recalls some early scientific films in which microscopes were used to reveal to us that reality could be, in fact, quite surreal in its core. How surreal would you say reality is in your perception of it?

It's not surreal. It's just nature that is always in a process of transformation. Your question is already an answer in itself: this idea of impermanence is everywhere, even in the performance that I mentioned — in each day's shooting, the actors' mood, the weather, the food we eat. That's the reason why I really try to control, or better, to conduct the elements of a given setting, as if it were an orchestra. I enjoy it very much. I used to like certain parts of the filmmaking better than others, but lately I feel that everything has its own rhythm, that everything affects everything. So, now, I even go to the hotels we are going to stay in and select myself the quality of the bed and the food. Regarding all these things, I became like grandma: I want the best of what our budget (which is a very low budget, anyway) can provide, because it affects the overall experience, for instance, say, what the light technician eats, etc... This is what I also call fluidity, the fluidity of things that you can more or less manipulate.

In your films several levels of reality seem to converge in one single plane, where a hidden and psychological geography mingles with the real and visible world, and puts us in connection with something behind, with the realm of dream, or of utopia (that doesn't exist in Thailand, as you said). This is very striking for us in the West, because we are used to separate the realms of the real and the unreal. The natural acceptance of all these dimensions as part of the same world is very disturbing in your work, but at the same time it seems almost like a political statement, with consequences for our vision of the world, but also of ourselves, of our humanity.

It's not only a political statement, but also my worldview, my attitude. It's like when you meditate; there's something layering, images of memory, the mind that is drifting from one thing to the other, even as we speak... So, when I make films I'm aware of this, because this manifests in some kind of perception, even though it is a hidden perception, and I try to simulate and present these layers of images that are not only visible, but also internal. Of course memory is always dictated by other things, for instance, by cinema, and the representation of ghosts in films, such as those I grew up with. In this sense, images are fluid, always changing, and going from reality to fiction and vice versa. Before ghosts were real, now they are not. So, in my films this constant shifting became more present and philosophical over the years.

But it is as if your cinema is building a world where all those elements — the ghosts, the fantastic creatures we have inside or that inhabit your country's memory and landscapes — they all are brought together and live together among and with us...

Yes, for the last film I agree.

The tension between documentary and fiction is very present in your films and seems to feed your concrete research about memory and the extinction of species, beliefs and languages. The facts are a vehicle for memory, what allows the echoes and projections of memories. For instance, the work you developed in the province of Nakhon Phanom and in Nabua, with the teenagers of the village, is exemplary of this. How do you deal with the dialectic between documentary and fiction in your creative process?

It started, in the beginning, with doubts on the existence of this dividing line between fact and fiction. I was definitely influenced and inspired by the Iranian movement of representing and fabricating reality through cinema. When you see some films by Mohsen

Makhmalbaf, they're about acting, they're about recording: even though you see the image and sound making apparatus in the movie, it is still manipulated, it is still fake, it is still sculpted in order to attain certain goals. This triggers my question: how do you represent in cinema? And it made me also doubt about so-called documentaries, those you see on television, and think of how subjective they are. So, in the end I would say that there is really no reality in cinema. To quote Manoel de Oliveira's *Visita ou Memórias e Confissões*, "fiction is cinema's reality." One can wonder: cinema is an eye, it is framing with that eye, and we, as human beings, also frame with our own eyes. Can you call our perception "reality"? Because it's all relative. This is also linked to a buddhism's idea of reality, the idea that all is constructed by us.

And in relation to your work with actors... You said that you use their stories and elements of their lives inside the films.

As I can imagine them.

You stated several times that you were greatly inspired by the experimental "cinemas of poetry" such as the structural film or the lyrical film, but some of your works experiment also with classical narrative, romanesque structures. In Mysterious Object at Noon there were highly charged emotional sequences, Haunted Houses is based on a contemporary Thai soap opera, and The Adventure of Iron Pussy is a shameless melodrama. Is your relation to this sentimental universe merely ironic and distanced, or are you genuinely interested in melodrama as a genre or a style? Do you think melodrama can also be lyrical?

In the beginning of my career I was interested in all these media, in particular soap opera and radio plays. These films were a definitive starting point, they are about finding stories, searching for the roots of stories. I grew up listening to the radio plays. As for *The Adventure of Iron Pussy*, it is a kind of satire, but it is a heartfelt satire.

In Cemetery of Splendor the experiences of sleep and of meditation are at the center of this capability of voyance, of seeing what is out of sight, not because it is hidden from view, but because it belongs to a specific strata of experience, that of memory altogether, that puts everything in connection with everything. How do you envision the cinema experience? Is it something that we experience as if we were involved in such states of mind, as you describe and observe in your film?

Yes, it's a dream. It's another kind of primitive dream. On the one hand cinema is really linear, but on the other it's just light and how we play with our memories... Well, on a second thought, any film, either from Hollywood or any other, is more about losing oneself and projecting than about memory, which is more important in installations or other artworks. Because cinema is about possession. Light possesses you. That's what I think. But somehow, sometimes, I would like to activate certain memories of the audience, to call their attention to the fact that they are watching a specific illusion on the screen, by either having the actor looking at them or through the sense of prolonged or stretched time. People are used to the cinema-time, but when they are confronted with another kind of cinema-time experience, suddenly they realize that "hey, something is going on there!" And they realize that they are watching a movie.

Your characters say a lot of trivial things in very ordinary and colloquial conversations, but the subject matters of your films are far from trite. You frequently engage with so-called big questions such as the transience of life, illness, family relations, destiny and even the mysteries of the universe. Could we consider your films a kind of philosophical investigation? Do you use cinema as a tool for better understanding yourself, others and the world? Do you use cinema as an extension of the process of thinking?

In fact, not much. I mean, I tend not to analyze what I do, but because of how the world operates nowadays, the academic world and the criticism culture, I was forced to analyze it. Lately I started to talk about these ideas, and all these things, which at a certain point led me to think that there is some kind of line that I wonder whether I am crossing it or not. If I cross it, will I lose the sense of *naïveté* that the child has while approaching images? I am finding out while I am doing it. So, the idea of intellectualizing the world is not something in which I feel really comfortable.

So what draws you to cinema? Because you once said that cinema is like life, but if cinema is like life, why do we need it? What does it bring to life?

I don't know. As I told you, I started the thinking on film by exploring some doubts concerning the tension between fact and fiction, and slowly I began directing films in which I tried to deal with those questions. Then I got entangled with members of the crew, and then more stories came to me. I am still looking at things in a very innocent way. I

have dogs, and I try to communicate with them, and it teaches me a lot what we assume that a dog knows, even if, of course, it doesn't know anything, or maybe it knows... So this is relevant when I hold a camera and think: "does it matter that people know these references? Can we appreciate life without knowing it?"

You also mentioned a few times this idea that maybe in the future we won't need this framing, that in fact we won't need cinema as we know it today. And that connects a lot with some of your characters. You seem fascinated by, for instance, the character of the monk that inspired Uncle Boonmee, and by the fact that he doesn't need cinema because he can produce his own images.

Yes. Cinema and art are always walking with technology hand in hand. And, of course, it is always about the experience, which is very exciting for me, because cinema has been very much about storytelling, like literature or theatre. But for me, it is about experience. We just need to go back to see the first cinema — the workers leaving a factory. There was no three-act structure. Cinema has always been trying to mimic dreams. From black and white to color; from silent to sound. Now we are moving from story to experience. And experience, like dreams, has no frame.

I was also thinking about that difference between documentary and fiction because it seems that in your work process you sometimes start with collecting — documenting, as you said — and in that course of events you produce a lot of small pieces and other objects that are not only films, and so I would say that cinema is the center, but it's not the only thing that you do...

Yes, it is a catalyst.

But would you consider yourself a filmmaker, and not an artist? Or is it unimportant to you the way you are defined as a creator?

It is like my name, Apichatpong. It is just a name.

So is it all equally part of this big thing: life, experience, the universe...?

Yes. I really appreciate some artists who keep doing something different, someone like Gerhard Richter, I really like the way he approaches his images... He's less of a duplication machine but a tree that grows. His artworks reflect this idea of "experience."